



# What About Positive Confession?

Illustrated by Emelie Stenhammar

**L**et's talk about the power of words. Hundreds of millions of believers all over the world believe that their words carry spiritual power. Because of this, they engage in the practice of speaking positive outcomes, affirming, decreeing, and declaring God's promises, confessing and stating their faith. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is characterized by its teachings on the spiritual power of words which often goes under the name "positive confession". In this article, I use the Bible to examine the belief in the spiritual power of words and the practice of positive confession. I want to find out what (if anything) can be helpful on our journey of faith and if there are things in the practice that can hinder our progress in faith. Make yourself comfortable, get your Bible and a cup of your favorite refreshment and let's get started.



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What I share in this article is not new to me. My journey of faith in Jesus began in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel movement in Sweden when I was a young man. When I sensed the call for the ministry I went to the United States and studied under what most consider the "father" of the movement and then ended up being a teacher of Faith & Prosperity theology for several years, reaching numerous people with the message. I gained many important experiences and insights during my time in the movement. One of the most significant insights is the power of our words; I have seen miracles happen after I spoke words of healing. Later on in the article I share about how somebody's eyesight was restored. I am thankful to God for that.

But there is no secret that I also recognize some significant problems in the Faith & Prosperity teachings. I have dedicated much time, effort, and resources to researching the Bible and Christian beliefs so that I can guide fellow believers to discern what is helpful from what is not in the Faith & Prosperity messages. My

doctoral thesis was on the movement and it was recently published, so if you are looking for an academic work with many footnotes and great insights (cough, cough) you are welcome to read it. Like many academic textbooks, it is crazy-expensive during the first year of publication but you can most probably find it in your local university library.

The reason for bringing up my story is that what I share in this article are things I have experienced first-hand, things I have believed and practiced myself, and insights I have worked long and hard to see. Just because I am a doctor of theology and do research in the theology of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel doesn't mean you must agree with me. But what I do ask is that you take the position of a truth seeker and consider my input seriously and don't just brush it off—particularly if you happen to disagree with what I am saying. And this goes for those who think I am too sweet on the Faith & Prosperity Gospel and for those who think that I'm too harsh—I often face both of these opposing reactions



(can you ever make everyone happy?). So, please hear me out; it could be that I have been digging long enough to learn a point or two that can be of help to you. At least, that is my hope and prayer, and motivation for researching, writing, and teaching. Enough of me, now to the task at hand.

## The Life-Changing Power of Words

If we start by simply asking the general question if words carry power (we leave the spiritual, creative aspect till later) the answer must be a resounding “yes!” Words affect every dimension of life.

The Bible speaks about the importance of our words and is filled with instructions on how we are to use our tongues in ways that glorify God and edify our neighbor. Jesus emphasized the importance of us using words well and pointed out that God is affected by our words—God listens and takes our words seriously (e.g., Matt. 5:37; 12:36). James underlines that taming our tongues, though difficult, is absolutely necessary for the person of faith (Jam. 2:2–12). Proverbs and other wisdom materials in the Bible warn us about how our words can make us sin against God. It issues the important warning that “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Proverbs 18:21 NKJV). Proverbs also gives commonsense instructions about godly usage of words in our social worlds, speaking of the power of gossip and rumor, the importance of keeping an oral contract, and how life can end up in ruins if we give a surety bond to a person who fails to honor their part and so on. Read Proverbs and James to access the main core of biblical wisdom on the power of our words and how we should use them.

Apart from such biblical guidance, we have come to learn that speaking God’s word aloud helps us to better comprehend and remember its message. Anyone who is in the good habit of memorizing Scripture verses

knows that speaking them aloud makes committing the text to memory easier. Speaking God’s promises is very helpful to learn Scripture and remind ourselves of its reality. It is a healthy and good practice that every believer should do. But there is more to the power of words than this.

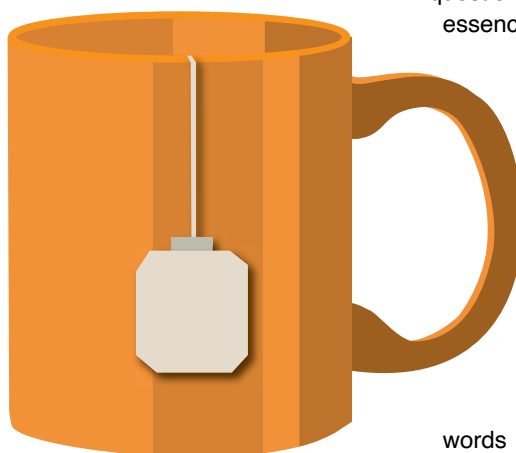
Our social realities, personal well-being, and how we perceive the world are directly shaped by words. And this goes for Christians and non-Christians alike. Think of it. If you—like me—have said “I do” before a pastor when they asked “do you take this wonderful person to love and cherish until you perish” (not really the question but this captures the essence of it) you know that words

do have power. Those two words “I do” changed the rest of my life. Or if you have been caught speeding by a traffic police officer but when you think you will get a heavy fine, they simply say “ok, you can go but don’t do

it again”, you know that words have power. Or if you have ever been really hurt by someone and

the person comes back to you and says “I am sorry, please forgive me” you cannot doubt the power of words. Or when an immigration officer says “you cannot enter because your passport is invalid” you also know that the direction of your life is shaped by words. The judge’s words “not guilty” or the doctor’s words “you are free from cancer” have radical effects on the life of the recipients.

There are many such examples of similar actions where words do create new circumstances. These are often called “speech-actions” because words are used to perform something, that is, words do not just say something but do something and make something happen—my “I do” changed my status from single to married. So, in light of this, yes words do have the power to change our circumstances and create new realities.



Beyond the power of words to shape our social world, words also affect our emotions, thoughts, and behavior. Research into how our brain functions—neuroscience—reveals how fearful and negative words easily generate fearful feelings and positive words generate positive feelings, which in turn influence our actions. Has anyone told you anything positive that changed your mood the whole day? I think all of us know the burst of energy and inspiration you get when you receive positive feedback and encouragement for something you did, especially if you were a bit uncertain of your performance. On this note, I wish believers would realize how much it means for a minister when you give them words of appreciation for their message. The positive energy generated by some simple words like “that really blessed me” or “your message spoke to my life” can make a preacher go from glory to glory in their ministry. Positive words of love and encouragement (when they are truthful, not used in a manipulative way) are the most wonderful gifts—and amazingly enough, they cost nothing to the giver. In fact, dopamine—the happy hormone—is released when we speak positively. So, we should sow bountifully with our words of encouragement and appreciation.

Words influence not just our feelings but also our actions. Research shows that positive words move the motivational centers of the brain into action, and help us to generate strength when we encounter life’s challenges. For example, it is a good practice to say aloud when we are worried about our future or facing a fearful situation: “The Lord is my helper, I shall not fear” (Heb. 13:6 NKJV). Or if we experience financial hardships, “my God shall supply all [my] need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19 NKJV). *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy* is a helpful secular self-help program that acknowledges the power of our words in shaping our feelings and habits.

Words can also affect us negatively. The saying that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words may never break me” is simply untrue. Words can be very

destructive. Have you ever received a phone call or a message on social media that robbed you of all joy and peace? One word alone (like “no”) carries the power to influence the processes of the brain that control physical and emotional stress. Key structures of the brain that control memory, feelings, and emotions can be damaged by dwelling on negative words, scholars say. A single negative word alone can disrupt your appetite, your sleep, and the way the brain affects your sense of happiness. The unconscious power of words to affect our moods is now shown by research: words repeated so softly that you can barely perceive them can still create direct changes in our mood.

## The words we speak affect our relationship with God, our emotions and thoughts, our worldview and self-image, and the people around us.

Our way of seeing the world is to a great extent shaped by words—those of others and those we speak ourselves. We all view reality in different ways and these worldviews—or whatever we call the lenses we use to interpret reality—are shaped in part by the words we speak. Research shows how language is a key factor in how we interpret reality. Two simple examples are enough. You can repeat a lie long enough until you believe it actually is the truth. Or if I continue to speak negative and degrading words about myself—“I’m so ugly”; “I’m so thickheaded”; or “I’m good for nothing”—that will affect

the way I see myself and the world around me. So, in a very true sense, we create with our words, because our worldview and self-image are shaped by our speech.

I also believe that the spiritual world is affected by our words. The atmosphere in a place seems to be somehow affected by the words spoken in it. If we enter a house where there recently was an oral fight and ugly words were spoken, there is something that still lingers in the air. It is almost like you can feel and touch it.

So, do words carry power? Of course! Words are very powerful.

The words we speak affect our relationship with God, our emotions and thoughts, our worldview and self-image, and the people around us. Yet it required



scientific research to establish this truth for many—including Christians—who just thought that words were more or less hot air unless you made a conscious choice to accept them. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel was way ahead of neuroscience on this point and they rightly emphasize the biblical truth of the power of words. They deserve a lot of credit for bringing to our attention that the tongue truly holds power over death and life! That is a gift to the body of Christ. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel has done well in lifting the power of our words on our social, mental, emotional, and spiritual worlds. I tip my hat (or would if I had one on) toward the Faith & Prosperity Gospel for emphasizing these points. Had I not heard it from them, I wonder where in the world I would have learned about the power of my words.

## One Practice, Many Names

Before we go any further I need to comment on the terminology used to refer to the practice of speaking positively. Inuits, as the saying goes, have a lot of words for snow. And the same goes for the Faith & Prosperity Gospel when it comes to the belief in the power of spoken words. The practice is referred to as “positive confessions,” “faith declarations,” “to prophecy one’s future,” “stating the promises of God,” “to decree and declare,” “affirming your faith”, and the like. I use “positive confession” here as it is the most known and used term.

Let me also quickly comment on the term “confession”. The Bible never uses “confession” for what the Faith & Prosperity Gospel has made it to mean (i.e., releasing faith by speaking positively). “Confession” is used in the Bible for two things: (1) acknowledging a fact, such as the saving fact of Jesus’ lordship (Rom. 10:9), or that believers are “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb. 11:13). (2) The second usage—and the one we most often think of—is to admit one’s sin (1 John 1:9). Those

are two usages of confession and no more. However, this should not per default disqualify the teaching, since Christian theology uses terms that are not in the Bible while the truth they refer to is biblical (e.g., “trinity”—a thoroughly biblical belief but the word is not in the Bible). Regardless of terminology, the ultimate question is if a teaching can stand the test of biblical accuracy. What is important is not what word we use, but that we examine the practice of speaking positively and that we test the big story that empowers it. To that, we now turn.

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## The Big Story

The conviction that our words carry spiritual power is an ultimate belief in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel that shapes everything else that they do and believe. So far, we have only covered the fact that words are more than hot air. We have agreed that words carry power—social, emotional, and volitional power. But what about spiritual, creative power? This is what the Faith & Prosperity Gospel actually claims: that words release the creative spiritual power of faith. For this we need more than brain research; we need to get into the biblical story and worldview. The best entry point is to first look at the reasons why the Faith & Prosperity

Gospel say what they do.

To better understand positive confession, we need to realize that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel operates in a big story. That is, they read the Bible’s big story of salvation in a certain way that gives shape to their practices and convictions (I develop this point in other places). Their interpretation of the Bible’s story makes words to be particularly important.

This is how their big story goes: God used words to release His faith to bring creation into being. In saying “let there be light” (Gen. 1:3) God spoke faith-filled words that brought to pass what He desired. The big



story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel continues to say that Adam and Eve were created in God's image, which gave them the capability to also release faith's creative power through spoken words. That is, Adam and Eve were gifted the authority and ability to use words as God does. Yet this gift was corrupted in their fall into sin but Jesus came to restore believers to the state of Eden.

In the big story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel, every Christian can appropriate the realities of Eden by faith. Because we are by faith able to live in the realities that Adam had before the fall, we are meant to shape our future by our words. We are to speak out—to confess—what we want to see as the reality in the physical world. So, if I'm sick, I will instead of talking about my sickness say that "I am healed." If I'm tired, I'll say "my strength is renewed like the eagle." If I'm broke, I'll confess that "I am rich and well supplied for." Jesus, it is claimed, used positive words to create in his ministry and taught us to speak faith-filled words to move the mountains of life. Mark 11:23 is the most used Scripture to support this belief.

It is also important to recognize that the big story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel includes the belief in absolute spiritual laws that govern the spiritual world. Positive confession connects with the spiritual law of spoken words. I don't have time to get into the belief in spiritual laws but you can look at my teaching "Unpacking Spiritual Laws" on YouTube if you are interested.

The problem we need to address here is if it is biblical to say that our words carry spiritual, creative power. The answer is "no and yes". I say "no" first because there are several big problems with this belief that we need to sort out before we can appreciate its positive aspects. But once the bathwater is properly thrown out, positive confession is still valuable. We have much to talk about so let's dive right in (you might need a refill on your beverage).

## Confession and Healing

Let us look at confession for healing for a moment. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel says that the sick person is to confess their healing before they see it realized in their bodies because confession is what brings the promise of healing into reality. By positive confession, it is said, faith is released to bring the unseen realities of healing and health into physical manifestation. We are already healed in the spiritual world through the work of Jesus, what is needed now is for us to lay hold of it and bring it into physical reality.

But is this mode of operation grounded in the Bible? A careful reading of the Gospels will show that the Bible never, and I repeat, never says that anyone confessed to being healed before their healing actually took place. No one who was healed created their health by first speaking. I know the Scriptures that sometimes are used, like the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:28), but even there she is expressing a future hope and not stating a present reality. There is simply no biblical precedence for the usage of words to create healing as the Faith & Prosperity Gospel teaches.

On the other hand, what we do find—and this is unflattering for the Faith & Prosperity Gospel —is the blind man who had to confess that he wasn't fully healed before Jesus completely restored his health (Mark 8:22–26). He named his sickness and turned to Jesus to heal him—that was the dynamic of healing then, it remains the same today.

## What's the Question?

An important insight when you want to mature in your way of understanding the Bible and theology is that our convictions are often the result of trying to deal with a specific problem that we encounter. In other words, most Christian doctrines saw the light of day as a response to a question. Take the very important



doctrine trinity as an example. It arose as the answer to the question of why Christians worshiped Jesus as God. This process doesn't mean that our doctrines are made up. Rather, the problems and questions that arise makes us to seek God for answers. We can often be unaware of this but it is important when you want to test the biblical quality of a certain practice or teaching. This method of identifying the problem that a certain belief tries to solve is helpful when evaluating positive confession.

We must keep in mind that a wrong question cannot get a right answer. For example, if I were to ask you "Which color is the number 8?" whatever answer you try to give will be wrong because the question is misleading to start with. When we encounter a misleading practice or belief, sometimes it is because it is an attempt to answer a false question. The devil is very clever: if he can lead us to focus on the questions and problems he raises, it is often tricking us into taking wrong turns. Notice that Adam and Eve's fall into sin began with the devil asking a misleading question (Gen. 3:1).

So, what underlying problem or question does positive confession try to solve? It can be phrased like this: how can the power of faith be released and become productive in our lives? This is a key concern in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel; they want to see faith in action (which is a noble desire, for sure). Since faith is believed to be a force, a spiritual substance, it makes perfect sense to ask this question. Positive confession enters then as the answer: the power of faith is released by our positive words.

Yet at this point we need careful discernment, because the argument begins with a false starting point—biblical faith is not a force, power, or spiritual substance but a relational entity (like love). If you are uncertain about this you can look at my teachings on what faith is and isn't. Since biblical faith isn't something in and of itself, the question of how it can be released becomes a misleading one and hence generates a faulty reply. In other words,

positive confession arises as the unbiblical answer to an unbiblical question. For positive confession to be a positive contribution in the life of believers, the practice must first be untangled from this false starting point and so make up an answer to a biblical question. I speak more about this in my upcoming teaching "Speaking God's Greater Yes: How Words Can Strengthen Your Faith".

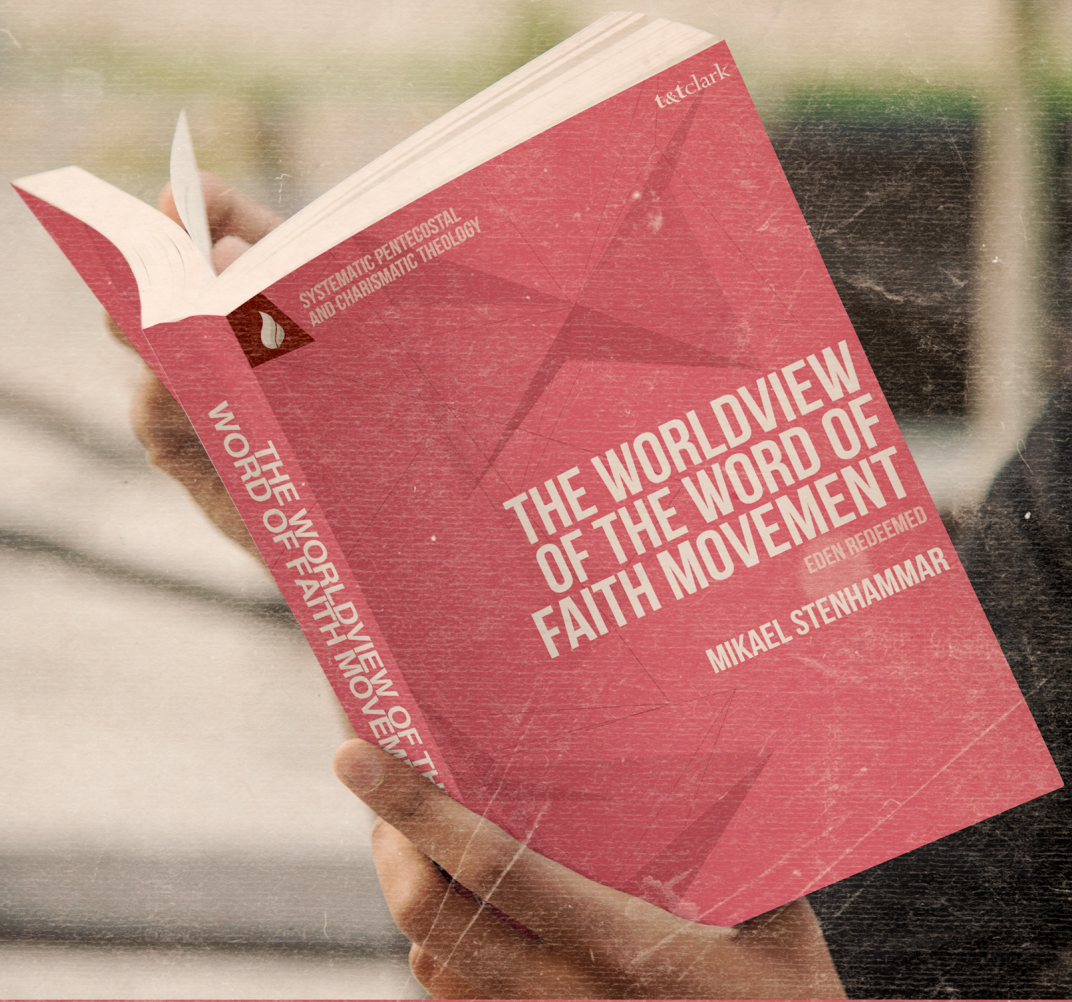
## Can Our Words Create?

**If we read the Bible as a committed Faith & Prosperity Gospel believer we will "see" things in the Bible because the big story conditions our vision and interpretation.**

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel's big story claims that our words match the power of God's words. God's "let there be's" were faith-filled words that resulted in new realities. Since we share God's DNA, our faith-filled "let there be's" carry equal creative power. As the saying goes, "confession brings possession". But let us analyze this logic that says that God created by words and since we are created in the image of God to act like God we can also create with our words.

On the surface of things, you might not think much about this. The logic sounds quite correct. But when you look below the surface you find some troubling issues. First, the Bible certainly says that God created by His word. But the idea in many Faith & Prosperity Gospel groups that God released His faith through speaking is a step beyond what the Bible teaches. Second, God used more than His word to create. I come back later to this very significant point. Third, being created in the image of God does not mean that we can act like God. The Bible never says so. We are to imitate God's love, as Paul makes clear in Ephesians 5:1–2 but there is no Scriptural foundation for the claim that we can operate like God. So the step from God creating by His words and that we are made in His image do in no way warrant the conclusion that we can act like God by creating with our words of positive confession—or declarations, commands, or whatever we choose to call "the snow". That is overstating our position in creation.





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bookseller or find it in a well-stocked  
college and university library.

The Bible is clear that it is only God who creates by words. In fact, the creation account in Genesis has exactly this as its main point: God is so powerful that He doesn't need anything to create. He didn't have to use preexistent materials or anything else but all God needed was just to speak. The creation story shows the total awesomeness of His power—that by simply speaking He created everything out of nothing. The Psalms celebrate how God creates by speaking and that this act signifies His incomparable greatness and power (Ps. 33:6, 9; 148:4–5). God's creative word is meant to set Him apart from everyone and everything else. God is God because only God can create out of nothing by His mere words. That is God's holy realm—humans are not to try trespassing into that.

Everyone reads the Bible through the filter of a big story. If we read the Bible as a committed Faith & Prosperity Gospel believer we will “see” things in the Bible because the big story conditions our vision and interpretation. One example of how we interpret within a big story—or through the lens shaped by it—is how the Faith & Prosperity Gospel reads Romans 4:17:

**“(as it is written, ‘I have made you a father of many nations’) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (Romans 4:17 NKJV).**

Reading this as if it was Abraham who had the power to “with a word make something out of nothing” (Rom 4:17 The Message), the verse is commonly cited to support positive confession. Yet this is precisely what the text doesn't say! Rather, Abraham put his trust in God because he believed that God—not himself—had the power to call “those things which do not exist as though they did”. He became the father of many nations because he was aware of his own limitations and therefore responded with trust in the creative power of God's

speech. This interpretation is quite obvious to anyone who reads Romans 4:17 without ever first been taught about positive confession.

Through the Faith & Prosperity Gospel big story, our eyes become trained to see things in the text which are sometimes just not there. This is not a unique problem only to the Faith & Prosperity Gospel—any big story can condition us to see certain things while blinding us to see other things. That is why we need one another in the pursuit of better interpretations of the Bible; you will see things I have missed and vice versa.

**The biblical worldview always poses the power of God's word in contrast to human words, it never equals them.**

## Human Speech vs God's Speech

The created order sets the limits for human speech. God makes this point clear when he speaks to Job. God reveals how He created the world by His word (Job 38:11–12) but then asks Job:

**“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, That an abundance of water may cover you?” (Job 38:34 NKJV).**

**“Does the eagle mount up at your command, And make its nest on high?” (Job 39:27 NKJV).**

The answer to both is a humble “no”. Human words do not have the power to bring rain or direct birds of prey. God made Job understand—and as a direct consequence, us—that there is a qualitative difference between God's speech and human speech. Human speech doesn't carry creative power the way God's word does. Our words work within creation; God's word comes from beyond creation. To put it negatively (with the danger of releasing negative processes in your brain): our words cannot break free from our humanness and the limitations of being part of creation. The psalmist says that arrogant people's “mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth” (Ps. 73:9 NIV).

In the biblical worldview, creative power is reserved for





God's speech alone. This point cannot be emphasized too strongly. It bears repeating that no Scripture (in their context) says that human words are creative. Only God's outbreathed words fuse heaven and earth and bring new realities out of nothing. This sets the one true God apart from all false gods—and humans with an inflated view of their own power. Job's reply is fitting for everyone who has overrated their influence in this world:

**"I'm speechless, in awe—words fail me. I should never have opened my mouth! I've talked too much, way too much. I'm ready to shut up and listen" (Job 40:4–5 The Message).**

Ecclesiastes also reminds us of the distinction between Creator and creation when it comes to human speech:

**"Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:2 NKJV).**

When we let go of sober judgment and start to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Rom. 12:3) it plays right into the devil's dirty schemes. Our enemy is quick to encourage humans to reach beyond the limits of creatureliness to become like God—as we learn from the temptation in Eden.

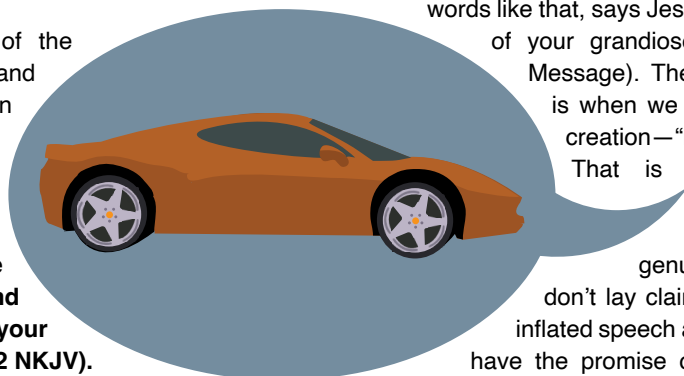
Speaking realities into existence is reserved for God alone. In fact, we are warned—not encouraged—in Scripture to try. To shape our future by our words is to act in arrogance and indeed make the sin of boasting, according to the Bible. "Do not boast about tomorrow, For you do not know what a day may bring forth" (Proverbs 27:1 NKJV). In James we encounter this passage that has a lot to say about using our words:

**"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit';<sup>15</sup> whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is**

**your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.<sup>16</sup> Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.'<sup>16</sup> But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil" (James 4:13–16 NKJV; see also 3:5).**

The Message version of this brings some more light here. James rebukes those who confess about their future: "Today—at the latest, tomorrow—we're off to such and such a city for the year. We're going to start a business and make a lot of money" (Jam. 4:13 The Message). This is exactly the type of confessions you hear in Faith & Prosperity Gospel groups. But using words like that, says Jesus' brother, is to be "full of your grandiose selves" (v. 16 The Message). The speech God blesses is when we know our place within creation—"if the Lord wills" (v.15).

That is true humility. The ironic thing is that those who practice genuine meekness and don't lay claim of the earth by their inflated speech are precisely those who have the promise of inheriting the earth: "Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5 NKJV). Practicing humble speech is an act of faith, rooted in the confident assurance that God will let you inherit the nations. Talk about a motivation to practice humility!



## Naming Power

The biblical worldview always poses the power of God's word in contrast to human words, it never equals them. You might want to reread that sentence because you mustn't miss that point. Human words are as frail and passing as we are, while God's outbreathed words are powerful and endure forever (1 Pet. 1:24–25).

What we learn from a careful reading of Genesis 1–2—and the rest of the biblical story for that matter—is that God's words are qualitatively different from human words. Two passages make this particularly explicit.



**“Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.” (Genesis 1:3–5, NKJV).**

Here we see that God spoke the world into existence and then gave names to His creation. It is of critical importance that we recognize this dual usage of God’s speech: to create and to name. We can say that God’s word carried creative power and naming power.

Now, which of these did God delegate to human speech? The Faith & Prosperity Gospel obviously answers “both”. But is that what the Bible says? Let’s turn to Genesis 2:19 and we will learn which of these powers God invested in human speech.

**“Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup>So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field” (Genesis 2:19–20a NKJV).**

Based on this text it is obvious that Adam’s words carried naming power. In other words, God delegated the power to name to human speech. And God responded favorably to Adam’s use of it because God later uses the very names Adam has given (e.g., when referring to animals by name in Job 39). This naming power speaks of the ruling authority that God shared with Adam and Eve over creation (see Ps. 8:5–8). However, a key insight is that we cannot find any place where God delegated creating power to Adam and that he then used words to create. If his words carried creative power equal to God’s, why is there no place that says so? In fact, there is not one single verse in all of Scripture that ascribes God’s creative power to human speech. If you underline key points in this article, that is a point that deserves a big, bright color. The burden of evidence rests heavily on the Faith & Prosperity Gospel that claims otherwise and has built the practice of positive confession on this idea that human speech carries creative power.

## Exposing a Dark Side

At this point we come to realize that positive confession is grounded in an overrating of our place in the world. This is where we also encounter a dark side in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel belief system—it always seeks to push beyond the limits of our human place. Teachings and practices arise as answers to problems, and an underlying frustration in all of what the Faith & Prosperity Gospel does is how human potential has been circumscribed by false teachings and a chronic state of unbelief among Christians. This is, in my humble opinion, a significant insight. But in trying to answer this problem they grossly overstate their answer. We have seen how their teaching on positive confession is one of the most obvious attempts and in doing this they are not as careful as they should be with the extremely important distinction that exists between the Creator and creation. This distinction is something that God points out to Job and God is upset with him and his “friends” for not paying enough attention to it. We are created in God’s image and that is a wonderful gift and awesome privilege. Yet sin so easily blinds us to our limitations in a pursuit to be more like God. Human fallenness resents the limitations of being human so instead of turning to God when we face our limits, we seek ways to expand our power. By doing so we upgrade ourselves at God’s expense. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel teachings on positive confession do not take the biblical warnings seriously (like how the warnings about wealth in Scripture are often skimmed over in their teachings on prosperity) and blur the distinction between human words and God’s words.

If only God’s words have absolute creative power, is the Faith & Prosperity Gospel wrong in claiming that we create by our words? Not entirely. In fact, they bring the conversation further along by at least lifting the issue of the power of human words. There is much more to say on this topic but I save that for another time, I only want to make you aware of how this problem of upgrading human potential surfaces in positive confession.



## Desiring Autonomy

If the Bible warns us to use our speech in ways that transcend our place within creation, why is the practice of positive confession so immensely popular? One reason is that human words do have greater power than commonly thought (but now proven by brain research), and Christian experience somehow showed that words are powerful but because classical Christian teachings for various reasons have missed that point, the vacuum generated by this oversight is filled by the Faith & Prosperity Gospel teachings on positive confession. In other words, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel rightly spotted a need and moved to fill it but in doing so they overstated their response.

While they do point out some valuable truths about the power of words that believers have overlooked, positive confession flirts with some dark desires within us. In Romans 1:21–23, Paul speaks to our temptation to replace God. That is, the devil and our bent toward sin seek to push us into what we can call “the sin of exchange”, where literally anything else will do in God’s place—as long as it is not God.

The ultimate replacement of God, however, is not with the devil, idols, or ideologies but with our egos. That is, we seek to somehow take God’s place and be a law unto ourselves—what is called “autonomy”. Positive confessions make this evident; there is no need to seek God’s guidance in each particular situation of life—we can command our future. There is a one-size-fits-all solution: just find a promise in Scripture and speak it by faith and what you say will turn out to be reality—your words are as creative as God’s.

The Bible has wonderful promises and we should lean hard on them, fill our hearts and homes with them, meditate and memorize them and sing and speak of them. God’s promises are simply amazing and I don’t want to downplay them for a second. What I want us to see as misleading with the practice of positive confession is rather how it makes the process of seeing

the promises of Scripture fulfilled as something automatic and at our command. In the Faith & Prosperity Gospel take on things, our words become the creative instrument we use to cause the change we want in our life: just find a promise of Scripture and then speak it forcefully. That’s enough. God’s promises and our confessions of them take the place above God—no need of seeking the leading of the Spirit in each unique situation.

## Muting the Holy Spirit

One of the absolute biggest problems with the teachings on positive confession is that it is based on a limited view of the role of the Holy Spirit. It is a serious accusation to say that the practice of positive confession is a quenching of the Holy Spirit so let me elaborate on my point.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel big story—which gives shape and content to the practice of positive confession—emphasizes (as we saw above) how God created the world by speaking and that our words, being created in the image of God, carry creative power equal to God’s word. It all hangs on the key point that God created by words yet we must stop and examine this in light of

Scripture.

I will show you that the way the Faith & Prosperity Gospel reads the creation story is mistaken. What they say is not the whole picture of how the Bible speaks of creation. Let us carefully read Genesis 1:1–3:

**“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup>The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:1–3 NKJV).**

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel big story only lets verses

**That God created by Spirit and Word makes a basic building block in the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit and the world.**



1 and 3 speak. Verse 2 is muted. So, they miss that the creation narrative says that God made the world by more than His word. Allowing verse 2 to have a voice, we realize that God created by His Word *and* His Spirit. This is such a critical insight that we need to think it through more thoroughly.

That the Spirit was active in creation is a very important theological point and one that is repeated in Scripture. Psalms, for example, says **“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth”** (Psalms 33:6 NKJV, emphasis added). “Breath” is a reference to the Spirit of God in this verse. The Spirit’s role in creation is vast and important. Not only was the Spirit active in creating the world, but the Bible also shows how the Spirit is continually at work by sustaining and giving creation life, and will one day bring it into its fulfillment in a new heaven and a new earth (Ps. 104:30).

What is crucial for us and the Faith & Prosperity Gospel is to realize that God’s Spirit was “hovering over the waters” *before* God’s creative Word came forth. To make it abundantly clear: the Spirit’s “hovering” came before the words of “let there be”—verse 2 comes before verse 3 (low hanging fruit, I know, but important nevertheless). To drive home the point we can ask the creation narrative: what came first in creation, the Word or the Spirit? It is of course ill-advised to set the Spirit against the Word, as they make God’s “two hands”, so to speak, but I pose the question here to show you the centrality of the Holy Spirit. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel only gives credit to God’s word in creation at the expense of the Spirit.

Where does this leave us? That God created by His breath and His Word. I still remember when the truth dawned on me that you cannot have a spoken word without breath! It revolutionized my life as it enlarged my perspective on the work of the Holy Spirit and how utterly dependent we are on the Holy Spirit. Without the creative work of the Spirit, there would have been no creative Word. It is simply false to assign creative power to the Word alone as the Faith & Prosperity Gospel does—there is no biblical basis for it.

The simple process taught by the Faith & Prosperity

Gospel of taking a promise of Scripture and speaking it to see it become reality is a Spirit-less activity. What I mean by that is that if not even God created by His Word alone, how can a believer claim anything different? Imitating God requires then that we allow the Spirit to have the dominant role, to be at the steering wheel, so to speak. The Spirit cannot be locked into a formula of positive confession and spiritual law.

That God created by Spirit and Word makes a basic building block in the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit and the world. But this crucial role of the Holy Spirit is completely overlooked in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel understanding of how God created the world. This is paradoxical since they claim to be the movement that honors the Spirit. If the Spirit is overlooked in the big story that empowers positive confession, it speaks to how the practice is actually also a quenching of the Spirit.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel failure to acknowledge the role of the Spirit in God’s story is a very serious matter. Jesus’ warning about sinning against the Spirit speaks to the importance of giving the Spirit His rightful place in God’s story of salvation (Matt 12:31–32). I am not insinuating that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel has committed the unpardonable sin, but I do claim that it is high time to allow the Spirit to have His rightful place in the biblical story and not to build practices on a reading of creation that privileges the spoken Word and so cuts the Spirit out.

Would it make any difference if the Faith & Prosperity Gospel acknowledged the role of the Spirit in creation? Certainly! Including the Spirit’s key role would counter the whole idea of an automatic process of releasing spiritual, creative power by speaking. Since the Holy Spirit was active in creation before God spoke the creative Word, it means that before any creative word is spoken now, it has to be birthed through the Holy Spirit—breath before word. That means then that our human words are not on par with God’s. But that’s not the end; human words can be filled with God’s power. I return to that in a moment. First, I need to share a personal story.



## “At My Word: Be Healed!”

An interesting thing happened during the time my perceptual field was shaped by the Faith & Prosperity Gospel’s big story. I preached a series of meetings in a church in Kenya and a lady who was blind in one eye came in front for prayer. She had accidentally had a stick poke her eye while working on a field which made her lose eyesight. My wife, who was in medical school at the time, confirmed that she had no vision in the bad eye. As I ministered to her, I didn’t pray for her healing, instead—acting out of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel big story—I just proclaimed aloud “at my word: be healed!” And do you know what happened? She got her eyesight back right there and then. The lady’s restored sight became a wonderful testimony and my wife also confirmed the miracle. Many people joined the services and packed out the building and we experienced even more amazing miracles—at my command. In fact, we counted over one hundred miracles during two days. (As you can tell, that was during a time in my life when measurable size was the most important indicator of God’s work. Nowadays I think we have to be very careful to quantify the work of God, but I’m getting off-topic as that’s something for another article).

This episode has troubled me ever since (and still does, to be honest). I rejoice over God touching the lady—and the others—but I have questions about how it happened and my role in it. The miracles made me think that I was somebody special and that my words carried healing power and I could tell it did the same in many of the people who attended the services. The experience also cemented me in the practice of positive confession; I had seen its power, so why question a winning concept? But when I began studying positive confession closely with the help of the Spirit in light of Scripture, I began to see that it leaves much to be desired. So here is how I have come to think about this experience now. I believe Jesus healed the lady and that, while I thought it was my words that worked the miracle, I unconsciously responded to the whisper of

the Holy Spirit, which turned my commanding words into a commanding prayer that God graciously answered. Healing was not at my command but at God’s command. A command that I voiced through the Spirit without me knowing it. The big story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel made me interpret this event as if my words carried the healing power. But within the biblical story, my words didn’t carry healing power then and they don’t do it now either—the only words that carry healing power are God’s outbreathed speech. We are simply called to be His mouthpieces.

I share this story and my interpretation of it because I believe many Christians share similar experiences.

They have practiced positive confession and seen God’s power at work. Because of that, they conclude—like I did—that the belief must be right. I’m not questioning the miracle or that God uses human speech as a vehicle to touch people, rather what we need to carefully reflect on is how we interpret such experiences. I think that the belief in positive confession is a false interpretation of genuine experiences. Let’s move on to better and more nuanced interpretations.

**The Bible is clear that a true and powerful prophetic declaration does not originate in the prophet but in God.**

## Echoing God

Spoken words can have a great spiritual impact. But notice that I said “can,” because the biblical worldview does not ascribe spiritual power to all words. Whether our words have an impact or not depends on where they originate. One major problem with the Faith & Prosperity Gospel is that they have made positive confession something separated from prophetic speech. But if this problem can be overcome, there is a way forward.

The Bible is clear that a true and powerful prophetic declaration does not originate in the prophet but in God. The prophet does not initiate the message but makes themselves a mouthpiece of the Spirit. Here the metaphor of echo is most helpful to explore. There was



a particular tunnel on the bicycle path on the way to our oldest daughter's daycare. Every day without fail she would shout a powerful "hello" in joyful expectation of hearing the resonated "hello, helloooo, hellooooooo". But she had first to say something before she got an echo. It would be a truly scary thing if one day she heard "hello, helloooo, hellooooooo" without ever having shouted anything (even worse if she heard "good bye, goooood byeeee, goooood byeeee"). No, echoes are by nature copies, not originals. How does this help us? We must understand the basic difference between echoes and originals when it comes to positive confession. God is the original; we are His echoes.

To be an echo of God is to truly prophecy: "The Lord has spoken! Who can but prophecy?", says Amos (Amos 3:8). And Peter tells us that "For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). That prophecy echoes God comes out powerfully in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek. 37:1-14).

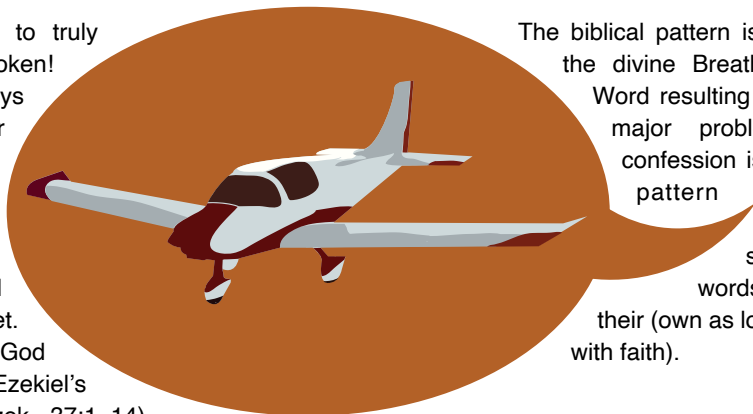
Here it is God who first speaks and the prophet becomes God's reverberation. This way of listening first and then speaking is summarized in the phrase: "I prophesied as I was commanded" (v.7). The command came first; it was on God's initiative. The biblical message is clear: the words of the prophet only carry the power to shape reality if God first has spoken it. It has to be the Lord who first has said "thus" before our human words carry divine power. "Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?" (Lam. 3:37-38).

One story from Acts shows the dynamic of Spirit and word and how prophetic speech must be initiated by God to be powerful.

**"Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, 'O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease**

**perverting the straight ways of the Lord? And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.' And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (Acts 13:9-11).**

Before we get too impressed and carried away with the powerful words of Paul, we must see that his speech was on the Spirit's initiative—the apostle was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (v.9) before he spoke.



The biblical pattern is always the same: the divine Breath causes a divine Word resulting in divine results. A major problem with positive confession is that it breaks this pattern by cutting the divine Breath out, saying that our words are creative on their (own as long as they are filled with faith).

## What about the Bible?

Someone thinking out of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel big story will quickly respond that the Bible is God's Word given by the Spirit's inspiration, so when we confess Scripture, we are God's echoes. This is of course partly true (as is the case with most other beliefs in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel as well). But there is a fundamental mistake made in this logic as it ascribes personal qualities to the biblical text. I am a firm believer in the Bible's inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16)—make no doubts about that. However, I am too much of a Bible believer to believe that the texts carry power in and of themselves. To think that they do is a serious mistake, one which Jesus called out in the Pharisees:

**"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. <sup>40</sup>But you are not willing to come to Me**



**that you may have life” (John 5:39–40 NKJV).**

Note that Jesus does not ascribe life to the biblical texts as such but to the person (Jesus) uttering the words. In the same way, we must not separate God’s Word from God’s Breath, nor must we separate God’s Word from the person of God. The life and power of God cannot be accessed in the Bible! That might come as a shock to you—it did me when I first started to see this truth. But we need to let the Bible have its rightful place; the Holy Spirit uses the written word so we come into contact with the Living Word—and Jesus not only gives life; he is “the life” (John 14:6).

## Commanding on God’s Command

I believe that there are times our words can carry spiritual power and we will be led to command in a Lazarus-come-forth sort of way. But we have to be echoes and not the original sources of such authoritative speech. The source of the power is always God, not us.

To illustrate: more recently—after entering a more biblical worldview—I was in another church in Kenya and when preparing to preach my heart was impressed by the Spirit that there will be a person tormented by an evil spirit and I am to command it to go. So, in the service, I announced that “I might be wrong but I believe there is a person here tormented by an evil spirit and that Jesus wants to set you free”. The final words hadn’t even left my mouth before a person started to scream and make a big scene. It was clearly demonic and we could all feel the chilly and eerie presence that comes with it. But I did as I had been instructed; I said on shaking knees: “In Jesus name, I command you to leave”. The command came with a power that surprised me and no sooner had those words left my mouth, the person abruptly stopped, sat up, and looked around with glory on their face like they had been anointed with some shiny oil and the sweet presence of Jesus filled the building. I have seen things like this numerous times (and I long to see even more). My point here is simple: the command and the power to realize the miracle did

not originate in me, my desire, my initiative, or my words. My command was a direct response to the move of the Spirit on my heart in this particular situation—I was simply an echo of what I had first heard before I spoke.

Two stories from the lives of Peter and Paul make good examples here. Peter must have passed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:1–10) many times (as he was laid there “daily” v.2) but on one particular day, the Holy Spirit came upon the apostle for the healing of the man. And when the Spirit moved him, Peter issued the healing command and the man’s health was restored. When Peter responded to the marvel of the people, he explained that the miracle didn’t happen because of his or John’s special “power or godliness” (v.12) nor because of their positive confession but by faith in Jesus. Notice how Peter points to himself as an echo, while Jesus was the originator.

Paul’s life also illustrates the point that we have to wait on the move of the Spirit before our human commands carry any divine power. The demon-possessed young woman in Philippi (Acts 16:16–19) had followed them “for many days” (v.18) before Paul, on one particular day, commanded it to leave her. It wouldn’t take a PhD in demonology for them to understand that the young woman was speaking through an evil spirit, so if his words always carried delivering power, he would have commanded the demon on their first encounter. The best answer as to why Paul hadn’t commanded the evil spirit to leave earlier must be that the Holy Spirit had not yet led him to do it. The apostle’s words brought deliverance only after they had been outbreathed by God.

What we learn from these two stories is that both Peter and Paul knew they were echoes and not the originators; they commanded on God’s command. They knew that if God has not moved in Breath and Word who dares to command? When Paul had not heard from God he added “if the Lord permits” (1 Cor. 16:7) to his words.

James, as you already have noticed, has a lot to say about the power of words. In a very interesting passage, he shows us that a positive confession that originates in



us is powerless. He writes,

**“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? <sup>17</sup>Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:15–17 NKJV).**

Can you see that simply giving a positive confession does not change reality? Also, contrary to many Faith & Prosperity Gospel teachings, James says that positive confession is *not* the kind of works that we need to add to make our faith fruitful.

The problem is that being an echo puts a demand on us to listen before we speak. And at times we have to wait long in prayer before we can be an echo. This is one reason I believe positive confession is so popular; it doesn't require the discipline of waiting on the Spirit and listening to God. We can simply grab a Scripture and speak it—it fits well with our fast-food, fast-everything culture.



Check out the video “The Big Story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel” on our YouTube channel.

## Prophecy Your Future?

We need to think a bit more about the practice of “prophesying your future” that I mentioned above. It is quite common in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel (and beyond) and is an act when believers declare and decree what they would like to see happening in their lives. Regardless of its popularity, the idea that we can command our day, our healing, our finances, and so on has a foundation of sand. Why? Because, as we just said, we are to be echoes and not the ones to initiate any prophecy. It is God alone who knows the end from

the beginning (Isa. 46:10). We only know “in part” (1 Cor. 13:9). To take it upon ourselves to prophecy our future—we who “do not know what will happen tomorrow” (Jam. 4:14)—is to fall into the sin of arrogant boasting that James so clearly warned us about (Jam. 4:13–16).

Think about it: if we were to prophesy our future, we would only speak good things, right? But Scripture is clear that true prophecy can also include warnings and judgments. The prophets who only speak messages that people want to hear are the false prophets (Mic. 2:11). We must not act like such fake prophets by prophesying our dreams. If we do, we will end up quenching the true Spirit of prophecy and so go spiritually deaf and blind as a consequence. And that is in fact what I believe is happening; believers are prophesying their positive futures with such fervency that they become tone-deaf to what the Spirit is actually saying. We need to remember Jesus' words: “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7 NIV)—a number of these were not the kind of things anybody would like to prophesy over their future!

Some might say that I am overreacting; you could make a case that to prophesy one's future is just rhetoric—it is no more than an innocent declaration of faith in God's general promises regarding one's life. If that is the case, then fine and good (though it should be called something else). But my point still stands: it is God who has the power to speak our future into being. It is for us to seek Him and become an echo of what He is saying over our lives. It is not for us to decide our tomorrow by cherry-picking Scriptures for what we desire our life to be. That is not living the life of faith.

## Word Worries

If we live in the worldview shaped by the Faith &





Prosperity Gospel big story that tells us that our well-being is determined by spoken words—those of others and our own—we will end up with some serious worries. I call them “word worries” and they surface particularly in suffering.

When things turn sour in life (I’m sorry to say, no one is immune to the challenges of life) the first worry is if we have spoken negatively or if we have accepted a negative confession. Believers who have accepted the belief in positive confession tend to worry about if they have opened doors for the devil to attack them by their speaking.

I have also seen over and over again how people who practice positive confession become fearful of what might happen if they speak about how life actually is. They think “what if I happen to speak a wrong and negative confession, that will open a door for the devil and my problems will be even worse”. I have had people even whisper their problems to me so that the devil would not hear their negative confessions. Instead of bringing freedom, positive confession cuts in and limits us. We cannot speak about what we go through or voice what we truly worry about—not even in prayer.

Personal relationships turn shallow when we can no longer speak openly about the realities of life and the struggles we face. I know of marriages that have lost a level of intimacy when one partner uses positive confessions instead of being honest and transparent about life’s ups and downs and parents who fail to build strong relationships with their children because the belief in positive confession exerts restrictive power over what is possible to talk about. The belief in positive confessions makes people nervous; they become snared by the words of their mouth (to play on Proverbs 6:2, a commonly cited Scripture in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel).

The fear of confessing something negative leads people to be creative in changing lyrics, poems, or even wedding vows—I know of Faith & Prosperity Gospel believers that say “for rich and richer” instead of “for richer and poorer”. People whose vision of the world is shaped by positive confession often monitor others’ speech as well as their own. You might also have met

those who have taken up the self-ordained ministry of being a “confession police” as they correct others’ negative confessions. In subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways they will either rephrase your words or interrupt you: “I don’t receive that,” “I cancel those words in Jesus’s name,” “no, don’t confess that over me” or something like that. They use their positive words to break the power of what you just said. One such confession police corrected me once when I said something as trivial as “drive carefully” to instead say “drive carelessly”—because we are not to drive “full-of-care” (care-full-y) but with “less care”. We might say that Peter acted like a confession police when he rebuked Jesus for speaking negatively about his future sufferings on the cross (Matt. 16:21–23).

There is no genuine liberty in positive confession as the practice promises freedom and power but leads to bondage. A good test of any teaching is to ask whether it gives freedom or not. Jesus said that “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32) and Paul told us that “Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17). The Spirit inhabits good theology and such teachings bring us into the freedom of living as God’s children in God’s world. Good theology sets us free to live the life God created us to have.

## False Impressions

Not only does positive confession limit what part of our experiences we can put words to, but it can also lead us to give false impressions of reality. For example, as a young Faith & Prosperity Gospel preacher, I kept confessing that “I have more money than I can spend” though that was far from my present experience as a single missionary on a very limited budget. My actual confession should have been “having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Tim. 6:8 NKJV) because that was about all I had. But I practiced the Faith & Prosperity Gospel worldview and kept decreeing that money was not a problem. The problem is that someone who heard me preach one day had more faith in what I said than I had myself. Just one or two days later I found that they simply doubled (or even tripled, if I remember rightly) some costs I had in the



place I was staying. When I asked why this sudden rise in fees, I realized that they actually believed that I had more money than I could spend—it was a humbling experience to let the cat out of the bag and inform them of my actual financial condition. To my relief, they kept my fees at their original level.

This somewhat innocent example illustrates a much darker dimension of positive confession, namely that it can lead us into giving false impressions of reality. I know people who have been wrestling with lethal sicknesses but never spoke of it but kept on telling even their closest loved ones that all was well and that they were healthy and strong. Their death came as a great shock and it brought dishonor to the name of Jesus. Preachers can use positive confession to give false impressions about the number of people in their church, the size of their budgets, or whatever. I have seen great building projects stall and fail because the church leaders practiced positive confession rather than openly stating present realities.

To be fair we must remember the Faith & Prosperity Gospel worldview: believers are not lying or intentionally trying to deceive anyone; they are acting out of their belief system shaped by the big story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel that they are literally back in the realities of Eden (as they interpret it) and therefore create realities with their words. By saying something which is not a present reality they call “those things which do not exist as though they did” (Rom. 4:17 NKJV). We must not forget that there are also responsible teachers in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel that encourage people to be honest about what they are going through while at the same time also keeping on with positive confession.

## God Doesn't Need Our Words

Positive confession and the big story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel restrict God's actions within the boundaries set by our words. It is not stated as bluntly as I just did, but that is the (unintended) consequence of the teachings. But the biblical story shows beyond any doubt that God moves when no human words have

been spoken. God is greater than human words and He is not limited by our confessions. The message is clear: God doesn't need our words to act.

Wordless prayers are very powerful because God responds to our cries even when we can't put them into words—think of Hannah in the tabernacle (1 Sam. 1:12–13). There are important dimensions of life that lay beyond human words. If we want a deeper prayer life and a more powerful walk with God we have to go beyond words into the sighs of the Spirit and the heart-to-heart communion with God in prayer that transcends human words (Mark 8:12; Rom. 8:26). Beyond sound, tears are also powerful wordless ways of expression and communication (John 11:35). This shows us that instead of positive confession we are invited to enter into a world of prayer and let the Spirit guide us into a deeper life with God. In doing so, we do not have to be afraid of misspeaking a word or two or closing the windows of heaven by a wrong confession. Our relationship with God is not controlled by spiritual laws and by confessing the right words. Life with God is a liberating walk—even a dance—in the Spirit. I can testify to the glorious freedom of being set from the practice of positive confession. It is like pulling the dark curtains and throwing the windows open to allow the rising sun and fresh morning breeze to fill the room—it is the scent of new and redemptive life!

That doesn't mean we throw the baby out with the bathwater. As I mentioned earlier, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel helps us see the power of words and make us aware to use them carefully.

## Is Complaining Allowed?

We cannot speak about positive confession without at least making mention of the important biblical theme of lament. By lament, I refer to God's people voicing complaints and griefs to God, at times even questioning (what appears as) God's lack of action. Laments expresses the kind of brutal honesty that is of key importance for a deeper life with God. This is testified to by the massive presence of lament psalms in the book of Psalms, where it is the dominant form of prayer



(making up one-third of all Psalms). You find lament in the prophetic writings as well. This tells us that God doesn't require us to have an ever-positive, Pollyannaish attitude in life.

From the Faith & Prosperity Gospel perspective, laments sound like a lack of faith and are usually classified as simply negative confessions. But we should not be so quick to disregard lament. Instead, we should see that faith is nourished not only by speaking hopeful words about God's deliverance (which is the positive contribution of positive confession) but also by voicing our complaints about our present problems. The Bible shows us that genuine faith in God can be voiced as both lament and praise. This is not the place to develop these important biblical themes (I return to them in other teachings), only to note that the Bible encourages us to voice our griefs to God. God invites us to put words to all facets of our human experience—He is big enough to handle our honesty.



## Spiritual Experiments are Off Limits

Before we end I need to quickly comment on experimenting as there are those who are prone to do spiritual tests. One such experiment that some Faith & Prosperity Gospel Christians have been involved in is the so-called "rice experiment", which is meant to show the creative power of our words (its source is outside the Christian faith but believers have caught on to it). It consists of putting cooked rice in two containers and then speaking good things to the rice in one container ("good rice", "beautiful rice", "nice rice" (rhyme again)—I guess your imagination sets the limit on what positive confessions you can make to rice, mine just ran out). To the other container, we speak negative words ("bad rice", "cursed rice", "ugly rice"). After some time, the experiment says, we will see how the rice we spoke positive words to is doing much better than the other we

spoke negatively to. This is meant to evidence how our tongues hold the power of life and death.

Though this experiment can take other shapes—I know one believer who tried it on plants—I think you get the basic thrust of it. (Let's leave behind the question of whether the YouTube clips in which such experiments are done and shown to work are genuine or not. For my argument, let's assume that they are). People within the Faith & Prosperity Gospel have caught on to this experiment and others like it. But wait a minute. I have said that there is power in human words: the power to shape how we see the world and ourselves, the power to cause effects in us and those who listen to us, and that our words affect God. Yet to use words to direct spiritual power like the rice experiment should be absolutely off-limits for every Christian. Why?

Because it is a form of sorcery which the Bible strongly condemns (e.g., Deut. 18:10–14; Gal. 5:20; Rev. 21:8). In magic you seek to channel spiritual power to accomplish your agenda. It cuts spiritual power away from a personal relationship with God. Spiritual power comes at your command

and you seek to direct it wherever you want it. The power of the Holy Spirit is not to be controlled or manipulated. The story of Peter and Simon the Sorcerer in Acts shows this beyond doubt. If you cannot recollect what happened there, I encourage you to stop here and read it in your Bible in Acts 8:18–23.

The moment the idea is planted in our head that we can use the power of the Spirit for our purposes we have listened to the same voice that told Jesus to speak to stones to become bread to satisfy his cravings (Matt. 4:3). In the devil's logic, spiritual power is to be used as an impersonal instrument to accomplish what you desire. What Jesus shows us is that the power of the Holy Spirit is deeply personal and that the way to experience more is by yielding, not controlling.



Another reason why such spiritual experiments are off-limits for every believer is that they are grounded in a lack of faith. If you already believed that your words carry power, why test them? Experiments are by nature a way of testing a possibility; scientists do tests to try out the validity of a hypothesis. The dictionary definition of “experiment” is “an operation or process carried out to resolve an uncertainty”. You will find that within the Faith & Prosperity Gospel there pops up every now and then various spiritual experiments, whether they are called that or not. Stay away from them because they are borderline to magic, are rooted in the devil’s logic, and evidence a lack of trust in God.

## Conclusion

Speaking positive confessions is a widespread practice in churches all around the world, both within and beyond the Faith & Prosperity Gospel movement. It

goes by different terms while its root belief says that human words carry creative, spiritual power. This stems from the big story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel which places human speech on par with God’s creative word. Even though human speech is powerful and impacts our lives in ways beyond simple communication—and we should be thankful that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel emphasizes this—the teaching misses fundamental parts of the biblical story, particularly the role of the Holy Spirit, which makes positive confession to hinder Christian maturity and growth more than it helps. By blurring the distinction between the Creator God and the creation, positive confession moves our human speech into a realm reserved for God alone. For positive confession to be a blessing to the body of Christ it must first be untangled from these key misunderstandings and allow itself to be fully shaped by the biblical story and worldview. That is something I am seeking to accomplish in the Liberating Faith project and I invite you to look at other videos and articles we produce.

